Revolutionaries & Trade Union Strategy:
A General Reading List of History, Theory, and Practice

by Joe Allen

"The emancipation of the working class must be the work of the working class itself." — Marx & Engels.

“We will support the officials just so long as they rightly represent the workers, but we will act Independently immediately [when] they misrepresent them.” — Clyde Workers’ Committee (1915).

Introduction

Marxists are guided by one principle in all our work: “The emancipation of the working class must be the work of the working class itself.” The international working class today is the most diverse representation of humanity in history, and the only class capable of freeing humanity from the catastrophes that modern capitalism has brought to our species and planet. It is this very democratic and liberatory concept — ”self-emancipation” — that distinguishes Marxism from other rival ‘socialisms’ in Marx’s time, and has proven a resilient attraction to tens of millions since his death in 1883.

Nowhere does this principle of self-emancipation apply more fully than in the workplace. It may surprise comrades that Marx and Engels were the first socialists to support unions and strikes. Engels wrote:

> *These strikes, at first skirmishes, sometimes result in weighty struggles; they decide nothing, it is true, but they are the strongest proof that the decisive battle between bourgeoisie and proletariat is approaching. They are the military school of the workingmen in which they prepare themselves for the great struggle which cannot be avoided. And as schools of war, the Unions are unexcelled.*

How Marxists should apply the principle of self-emancipation in the workplace and in the unions that have flowered since Marx and Engels’ time, however, has shown itself to be a more complicated and thornier political question. At one time, Industrial unionism, for many radicals and revolutionaries, was the cure-all for the limits, if not reactionary practices of craft-based unions. Yet, the industrial trade unions that flowered in the years following the Second World War became highly bureaucratized and undemocratic, and a leadership very remote from the realities of shop floor work life, for example. In the United States, there were also key allies of U.S. imperialism.

The rank and file rebellion was a product of this untenable situation across many industries and countries beginning in the mid-1960s through the late 1970s. This rebellion had a profound effect, especially on the U.S. New Left in the years following the end of the U.S. war in Vietnam. Thousands of activists left the campuses and went into the factories, mills, auto plants, shipyards, and many other industries to radicalize the already burgeoning rebellion in the U.S. workplace. A similar but distinct movement took place in many other countries in the 1970s. The rank and file rebellion of the 1960s and 1970s was an international phenomenon. How different revolutionary parties and organizations in different countries intervened in this upsurge varied greatly.

For another example, much of the framework of the Rank and File Strategy (RFS) pursued by the International Socialists (IS) in Britain and the I.S. in the U.S. in the 1970s was heavily influenced by their respective Communist Parties’ trade union work in the 1920s, such as the Minority Movement in Britain and the Trade Union Education League (TUEL) in the U.S., at least, up until 1927, led by William Z. Foster. Foster pioneered the historic shift away from the “dual unionism” of the IWW and led mass organizing campaigns in Chicago’s stockyards during WWI and the Great Steel Strike of 1919. Foster remains the most impost Marxist trade unionist in U.S. history, despite his later embrace of Stalinism. Yet, how the British I.S. (now the Socialist Workers Party) and the I.S. in the United States implemented this strategy and the conclusions they drew were very different.

Keep in mind also, that the Communist International primarily saw their trade union strategy as a method of turning the relatively “small” Communist Parties of Britain and the U.S. into mass parties. It was not a “trade union” strategy in and of itself. It was not narrowly conceived of as reforming unions, but a political strategy to build a militant union that would in-turn create a mass revolutionary party. The revolutionary left today, with few exceptions, is very tiny and largely isolated from the much smaller, but still potentially powerful, industrial working class. We are in some sense back to the beginning, but luckily for us we have the experience of over 100 years of revolutionaries grappling with these questions.

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Syndicalism and the ‘Militant Minority’

The *Agitator* and *Syndicalist* newspaper collection (1910–13), available here.

Ralph Darlington, *Radical Unionism: The Rise and Fall of Revolutionary Syndicalism*, Haymarket Books, available here.

Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States: Industrial Workers of the World,* available here.

William Z. Foster, *Special News from France*, available *here.*

William Z. Foster, *The Socialist and Syndicalist Movements in France*, available here.

William Z. Foster, *Syndicalism*, available here.

William Z. Foster, *From Bryan to Stalin,* available in most city libraries.

William Z. Foster, *The Great Steel Strike and its Lessons*, available here.

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Vincent St. John, *The IWW: Its History, Structure and Methods*, available here.

Lenin, the Bolsheviks, and the Communist International

Tony Cliff, *Lenin Vol. 1: From the Marxist study circle to industrial action* (1975), available here.

V.I. Lenin, *Should Revolutionaries Work in Reactionary Trade Unions?* (1920), available here.

V.I. Lenin, *Factory Courts*, available here.

Kevin Murphy, *Revolution and Counterrevolution: Class Struggle in a Moscow Metal Factory*, available here.

John Riddell, *To the Masses: Proceedings of the Third Congress of the Communist International (1921)*, available here.

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Rosa Luxemburg

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Alan Singer, *Communists and Coal Miners: Rank-and-File Organizing in the United Mine Workers of America during the 1920s*, available here.

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Ken Appleby, *The Rank and File Movement: Yesterday and Today* (1975), available here.

Tony Cliff & Donny Gluckstein, Marxism and Trade Union Struggle:: The General Strike of 1926 (1986).

Will Gallacher, *Clyde Workers' Committee: To All Clyde Workers* (1915 leaflet), available here.

Duncan Hallas, The First Shop Stewards' Movement, (1973), available here.

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Jim Higgins, *The Minority Movement* (1970), available here.

Jim Higgins, *Revolutionary Trade Unionism* (1971), available here.

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J.T. Murphy, *The Workers' Committee An Outline of its Principles and Structure* (1917), available here.

Minneapolis: Teamsters and Trotskyists

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Farrell Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion, Teamster Power, Teamsters Politics, and Teamster Bureaucracy*, available here.

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James Rumford Walker, *American City: A Rank and File History of Minneapolis* (2005), available here.

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Radical America magazine, *American Labor in the 1940s*, available here.

Martin Glaberman, *Wartime Strikes: The struggle against the no-strike pledge in the UAW during WWII,* available here.

Max Shachtman, *Labor and Strikes in Wartime* (April 1941), available here.

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Colin Barker, *I.S. in the 60s: two thousand workers with bricks: the Roberts-Arundel strike*, available here.

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Martin Barker, *The Merseyside Building Workers' Movement: A Case History* (1968), available here.

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Brian Pearce, *Some Past Rank and File Movements* (1959), available here.

Italy: Hot Autumn of 1969 and 1970s

Avanguardia Operaia and the International Socialists, *A Debate: Revolutionary Politics Today* (1975), available here.

Mike Balfour, *Italy: The Unions and Rank and File Power* (April 1973), available here.

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Kim Moody & Sy Landy, *The Unions Under Monopoly Capitalism: The Ranks Need Independent Struggle Committee*, available here.

Kim Moody, *Turning to the Working Class (2018),* available here.

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Sojourner Truth Organization, *Workplace* Papers (1972–1980), available here.

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Cal Winslow, *The Decade of the Rank and File: Fifty Years On,* Counterpunch, January 2021, available here.

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Michael Hamlin with Michele Gibbs, *A Black Revolutionary's Life in Labor: Black Workers Power in Detroit*, available here.

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Jack Weinberg, *Detroit Auto Uprising 1973* (1974), available here

Workers Power newspaper, *Black Panther Caucus at Fremont GM, Interview with Kenny Horsten*, available here.

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Aaron Brenner, Robert Brenner, Cal Winslow, *Rebel Rank and File: Labor Militancy and Revolt from Below in the Long 1970s*, available here.

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Candace Cohn, *Women's Liberation and the Rank and File Rebellion in Steel*, available here.

Ken Crowe, *Collision: How the Rank and File Took Back the Teamster* (1992), available here.

Mary Deaton, *How to Beat the Big Brown Machine*, available here.

Farrell Dobbs, *Hoffa and the Teamsters*, (Summer 1966), available here.

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Joe Klein, *Eddie Sadlowski: Old-Fashioned Hero of the New Working Class, Rolling Stone* (1975), available here.

Barbara Koppel, *Harlan County, USA*, available here.

Dan La Botz, *Rank-and-File Rebellion: Teamsters for a Democratic Union* (1991), available here.

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Lee Sustar, *Black Power at the point of production, 1968–73*, available here.

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Robert Brenner, *The Paradox of Social Democracy* (2016), available here.

David Camfield, *What is the Trade Union Bureaucracy? : A Theoretical Account*, available here.

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Charlie Post, *On the Labor Bureaucracy* (1997), available here.

Warren Van Tine, *Making of the Labor Bureaucrat: Union Leadership in the United States, 1870–1920*, available here.

The New Left, the Working Class, and "Industrialization"

Joe Allen, *Between Workers and Students*, available here.

Jack Barnes, *Leading the Party into Industry* (1978), available here.

Hal Draper, *Rank and File Organization in the Labor Movement* (1970), available here.

Max Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao and Che*, available here.

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Peter Camejo, *Against sectarianism: The Evolution of the Socialist Workers Party 1978–1983*, available here.

Sheila Cohen, *Ramparts of Resistance: Why Workers Lost Their Power, and How to Get It Back*, available here.

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Charles Denby, *Indignant Heart: A Black Worker's Journal* (1978), available here.

Milton Fisk, *Socialism From Below in the United States: Chapter VII. The mid-Seventies to the founding of the International Socialist Organization* (1977), available here.

John Hendrickson, *Working at Harley-Davidson,* available here.

Alice and Staughton Lynd, *Rank and File: Personal Histories by Working-Class Organizers* (2012 edition), available here.

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Ahmed Shawki and Paul D'Amato, *Origins of the International Socialist Organization*, February 2019, available here.

David Ranney, *Living and Dying on the Factory Floor: From the Outside In and the Inside Out* (2019), available here.

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Contemporary Strategies for Workplace Struggles

Ian Allinson, *Workers Can Win: A Guide to Organising at Work*, available here.

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Eddie Conlon, *Ireland's Working Class Is Still the Key Force for Social Change*, available here.

Jane Hardy, *Nothing to Lose But Our Chains: Work and Resistance in Twenty-First-Century Britain*, available here.

Kim Moody, *Workers in a Lean World: Unions in the International Economy, available here*; *On New Terrain: How Capital Is Reshaping the Battleground of Class War*, available here.

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